DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 242 PS 017 727

AUTHOR Currie, Charlotte E.
TITLE Current Trends in Public School Kindergarten: Full Days and Four-Year-Olds. Research Report.
PUB DATE Aug 88
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Early Childhood Education; *Educational Quality; *Kindergarten; *Preschool Education; *Public Schools; *School Schedules
IDENTIFIERS *Full Day Programs; *Half Day Programs

ABSTRACT

Examined are proposals for full-day kindergarten (FDK) and arguments for kindergarten entrance at 4 years of age. Discussion explores possible advantages and disadvantages of FDK and reports on expert opinion regarding full-day programs. Arguments for and cautions against the enrollment of 4-year-olds in public schools are reviewed. Concluding remarks contrast quantity and quality in kindergarten programs. It is asserted that regardless of whether kindergarten children begin school at 4 or 5 years of age, or whether the time allotted to the kindergarten day consists of full or half days, in the long run, the quality of the program must be the primary concern. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED303242

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

A RESEARCH REPORT ON

CURRENT TRENDS IN PUBLIC SCHOOL KINDERGARTEN: FULL DAYS AND FOUR-YEAR-OLDS

Submitted to

ERIC/Early Childhood & Elementary Education

For Publication

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Charlotte E. Currie
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PS 017227

by

Charlotte E. Currie

Kindergarten Teacher

Arlington Heights Elementary School

1100 North Ninth Street

Stroudsburg, PA 18360

August 1988

Current Trends in Public School Kindergarten: Full Days and Four Year Olds

With critics of America's public schools demanding higher academic standards and calling for reforms in education, educational policy makers have responded with various proposals. There are those who would begin immediately to make standards for high school graduation more stringent and work to make the high school curriculum more rigorous (Glazer, 1985).

Other reformers feel that change is best initiated from the bottom up, beginning in preschool and kindergarten. The proposals advanced by the latter group are those I wish to examine in this paper. Specifically, full-day kindergarten, and kindergarten entrance at age four (Glazer, 1985).

Full-Day Kindergartens

More than one third of all kindergartens in the United States now have full-day programs, and these numbers are growing. Some full-day kindergartens have been established in response to changing family patterns. With so many children under the age of five living in single-parent families, and half of all mothers of children under the age of five employed outside the home, there is a belief that today's fragile American family needs the support of a full-day kindergarten (Seefeldt, 1985).

More frequently, however, the full-day programs are promoted because of an attitude among some educators that children need a

longer day in kindergarten in order to get ready for first grade. Longer days allow students more time for learning activities in reading, math, and writing they contend (Seefeldt, 1985).

Those who have attempted to evaluate the impact of full-day kindergarten programs upon America's children feel that such complex issues are best studied through a combination of data from parents, teachers, administrators, and child care experts. Despite the magnitude of such an endeavor, many comprehensive studies of kindergarten options have been conducted recently (Jalongo, 1986).

Glazer (Glazer, 1985), and Jalongo (Jalongo, 1986) submit data from numerous surveys and research studies which have examined a range of possible advantages and disadvantages of the full-day kindergarten. A compilation of these findings follow.

Possible Advantages of Full-Day Kindergarten

The possible advantages for children in full-day kindergarten programs include increased learning time; increased opportunity for remedial programs and enrichment in science, art, and music; more opportunity for individualization; and more contact with teachers and peers. In addition, grade retention and special education placement may be reduced, and disadvantaged children may benefit from health screening, a school lunch program, and the opportunity of being in the learning environment itself (Glazer, 1985; Jalongo, 1986).

Parental benefits from full-day kindergarten include decreased

day-care expense for working parents; greater convenience for parents; and better communication with teachers (Glazer, 1985; Jalongo, 1986). The school district benefits were cited as increased government subsidy; administrative ease of scheduling and staffing; elimination of an additional bus run; and better use of space and teachers in schools facing decline in enrollments (Glazer, 1985; Jalongo, 1986).

Possible Disadvantages of Full-Day Kindergarten

When looking at disadvantages of full-day kindergarten with regard to the children in such programs, researchers found more evidence of fatigue and absenteeism among children; more difficulty in adjustment to school; and less mature children frustrated by the learning environment (Glazer, 1985; Jalongo, 1986). That formal academics may be introduced before the child has attained readiness was also reported as a disadvantage for children in full-day kindergarten programs (Jalongo, 1986). Larger classes and heavier teacher workload; the difficulties of adapting curricular goals to the six-hour day; and adherance to objectives underlying the half-day model were additional disadvantages cited for full-day kindergarten (Glazer, 1985).

The only disadvantage reported by the researchers for parents whose school districts are implimenting full-day kindergartens was that parents who prefer to spend more time with their child might feel pressured to comply with the full-day program (Jalongo, 1986).

Possible disadvantages to school districts implementing full-day kindergartens cited most often were higher costs due to increased need for personnel, space, equipment, and supplies (Glazer, 1985; Jalongo, 1986).

Expert Opinion Regarding Full-Day Kindergarten

Expert opinion has often been sought in an attempt to clarify the half-day versus full-day kindergarten issue. For example, forty-eight college professors of early childhood education from thirteen midwestern states were surveyed, and asked to rank the current kindergarten options from their perspective. These experts ranked half-day kindergarten first (56%), followed by full-day every day (38%). Full-day alternate day was a distant third choice (6%) (Jalongo, 1986). Once again, we see mixed results.

Many studies have focused upon the possible advantages and disadvantages of a full-day kindergarten program. As we have seen from the research data, there are arguments for, and arguments against the full-day kindergarten experience. While the controversy surrounding full-day kindergarten continues to produce arguments on both sides of the coin, still another issue has recently begun to complicate the field of early childhood education. Specifically, public schooling for four-year-old children.

Four-Year-Olds in Public Schools

In addition to the trend toward full-day kindergarten, a developing momentum is moving our nation toward universal education

for four-year-olds as well. Texas, Michigan, Alaska, Washington, South Carolina, Maryland, Connecticut, and New York are among the states either considering or implementing kindergarten programs for four-year-olds (Seefeldt, 1985; Aigler, 1988).

Formal education should begin at an earlier age. Schools should begin the developmental education of students at age four. This was the recent recommendation issued by the National Education Association. The Association's stand lent added weight to similar statements from the National Association of Elementary School Principals (Doud & Finkelstein, 1985), and most recently, the American Federation of Teachers endorsed the downward extension of public schooling to four-year-old children (Zigler, 1988). It is obvious pressures are steadily mounting for the inclusion of four-year-olds in the public schools.

Arguments for Four-Year-Olds in Public Schools

One major justification for four-year-olds in public school programs seems to be based upon the following train of thought. Early educational experiences have been proven to be beneficial for children. Early educational experiences can save society money in the long run. Therefore, initiatives in early educational experiences may be the most sensible way to save the next generation from school failure (Zigler, 1988).

This type of rationale is substantiated by research findings such as those reported from a longitudinal study of experimental

pre-school programs operated in the public schools of Yipsilanti, Michigan between the years of 1967 and 1970. An ambitious sixteen year study which followed students who had been enrolled in those experimental pre-school programs provides convincing evidence that children who experience a year in a compensitory program such as Head Start are more likely to graduate from high school, to enter college, and to hold jobs. They are less likely to repeat grades, to require remedial education, or to wind up in jail or on welfare rolls (Seefeldt, 1985).

Another argument for universal education for four-year-olds focuses upon the equity issue. If one examines census data regarding incomes of families whose children were enrolled in early childhood programs in 1980, one sees that almost seventy percent of the four-year-olds came from families with gross incomes of above $25,000; only a little over thirty percent came from families with incomes below $15,000. In other words, children from wealthier families were more than twice as likely to attend a program than those from poorer families. It is easy to see the impact this unequal access has on the social fabric of our nation (Campbell, 1988).

Along with the belief that early schooling can benefit children's long term development, current societal trends have added further impetus to the thrust for providing educational experiences for four-year-olds in the public schools. Today's

typical four-year-old is likely to be living either in a single parent home, or a family in which both parents work. He has probably been in a day care or nursery school program for at least one year(Doud & Finkelstein, 1985). Indeed, over sixty percent of all four-year-olds nationwide are in programs. According to the 1980 census data, attendance in pre-school programs tripled between 1970 and 1980, and the numbers are rising daily (Campbell, 1988). The growing availability of pre-school programs, coupled with greatly increased family mobility, and the inundation of knowledge created by the electronic age, have led some factions to deduce that the four-year-old of today is living a life vastly different from his or her counterpart of even two or three years ago, and is therefore ready to begin "formal" schooling. Support for this point of view has grown in recent years (Doud & Finkelstein, 1985).

One of the proponents of incorporating four-year-olds into kindergarten programs is James Doud, president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Mr. Doud is associate professor of teaching at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, and principal of the University's Malcolm Price Lab School. For nearly sixteen years, Malcolm Price Lab School has operated a program in which four and five-year-olds are grouped together in a two year kindergarten program. It is Doud's contention that there are many advantages of grouping four and five-year-olds in the same

class. Such grouping emphasizes the idea that children are unique individuals rather than kindergartners or four-year-olds; provides a wider range of individual differences in the mental, social, physical and emotional development of children within the class (the school operates under the philosophy that the greater the difference among children in a classroom, the richer the learning environment for each child); provides an opportunity for the immature five and the mature four-year-old to interact with others at similar levels of development; minimizes the tension and stigma of retention for those children who are not ready for first grade work; provides teachers with the opportunity to work with the same group of children for two years. This allows the teacher to better know the children and their home situations, to identify more specifically learning styles and needs, and facilitates the early identification, diagnosis, and treatment of special emotional, physical or intellectual needs of the children (Doud & Finkelstein, 1985).

Cautions Against Formal Schooling For Four-Year-Olds

While the Malcolm Price Laboratory School seems to have successfully integrated four-year-olds into its two year kindergarten program, at the same time, Doud and his colleagues have stressed that it would be a major error to bring four year olds into existing kindergarten programs that might attempt to teach them reading, writing, and other cognitive skills, thus

placing them under learning stress one year earlier than at present. It is important to assure that programming for four-year-olds is beneficial rather than harmful. Programs must be developed not so much to accelerate the intellectual growth of the child as to provide enriching experiences which build a solid base for successful learning in later years (Doud & Finkelstein, 1985).

Adding further words of caution to the clamor for universal education for four-year-olds is David Elkind, author, educator, and current president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Elkind stresses that when we attempt to teach young children as if they were elementary school pupils we put them at risk for short term stress and long term personality damage (Elkind, 1986). In response to the "brighter, more sophisticated four-year-old" rationale for exposing young children to formal schooling at age four, Elkind argues that this type of intuitive psychology derives from emotions and feelings rather than from reason and balanced judgement. It is a fallacy to believe that technology has changed the way humans think and grow and develop. There is simply no truth, he states, in the intuitive belief that technology alters human behavior (Elkind, 1986).

Edward Zigler, who has long been an advocate of cost-benefit analyses for all types of social programs, addresses those who would use data from experimental pre-school programs to illustrate the ways in which universal public schooling could benefit all of

America's four-year-olds. He contends that the experimental nature of such programs ensured that the programs would be exceptionally well planned, monitered, managed, and funded. He feels it is highly unlikely that the typical public school program would equal the quality represented by such experimental programs, and warns that universal schooling for four-year-olds will result only in a watering down of the funds which are currently available for compensatory educational programs for young children (Zigler, 1988).

As was true of the controversy surrounding full-day kindergarten, the issue of universal public schooling for four-year-olds presents us with evidence in support of both sides of the argument. Complex questions, it would appear, have no simple solutions.

Quantity Versus Quality In Kindergarten Programs

Kindergarten has been a part of public education in our nation since 1873, when the first public school kindergarten was established in St. Louis. Over the last half century, kindergarten was regarded as a familiar, pleasant and profitable experience for five-year-olds. Until recently, there was no need to hurry children into early academic achievement. Everyone accepted the fact that young children need time to grow, to learn concepts, to solve problems, and to learn to work with others. There would be time for "formal" schooling later on (Seefeltd, 1985). Today, however, societal factors seem to be changing the way in which America

approaches educational programs for the youngest of our children. As we have seen, full-day kindergarten, and public school programs for four-year-olds are a growing phenomenon in America. Not only has kindergarten been expanded to a full day, with four-year-olds included, but the program has changed as well (Seefeldt, 1985).

Amidst the controversy surrounding current trends in America's public school kindergartens there are those who seek to remind us that the quantity of time spent in school is far less significant than the quality of the kindergarten experience (Jalongo, 1986). If kindergarten is to really pay off, whether for fours or fives, full day or half day, programs must be based on the children's need for mental, physical, and social activity (Seefeldt, 1985). They would further remind us that any kindergarten requires a consistent schedule, a developmentally appropriate curriculum, and teachers with specialized backgrounds in early childhood education (Jalongo, 1986). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the nation's largest professional association of early childhood educators, believes that high quality, developmentally appropriate programs should be available to all four-and five-year-old children. The NAEYC has issued a position statement which describes both appropriate and inappropriate practices in early childhood programs. These beliefs about appropriate practice are supported by a growing body of both laboratory and clinical classroom research and

theory (NEAYC, 1986). The National Association for the Education of Young Children would agree that school districts providing excellent kindergarten programs share the following characteristics: 1) Careful planning and preparation. The school districts survey parents, conduct open meetings and offer inservice education for teachers as part of the kindergarten planning process. An orientation program for kindergarten children is also provided. Teacher-to-child ratio seldom exceeds one to twenty. Teacher aides assume responsibility for routine matters, thus enabling teachers to devote more time to instruction. Instead of emphasizing difference of opinion, the school districts promote home-school-community cooperation. Opportunities for parent involvement are numerous and varied. 2) Curriculum development. District personnel recognize that the developmental needs of young children are different from those of older students. A full-day kindergarten program is not simply a longer version of the three-hour program, nor is it a watered-down version of the primary curriculum. Skilled early childhood specialists assist in design of new curricula and in the review of existing programs. Program components such as free play or rest period are viewed as ways of meeting the young child's developmental needs rather than as ways of wasting time. 3) Comprehensive and continuous evaluation. Successful kindergarten programs exist in districts where major decisions are not made on the basis of a set of standardized test

scores. Not only the child's intellectual growth but also his self-concept, psychomotor skills and socioemotional growth are valued and supported. Information on student progress is obtained from standardized tests and criterion referenced tests, along with classroom observations, teacher interviews and parent surveys. Each programmatic and curricular change is based upon sound educational theory, research and practice (Jalongo, 1986).

Conclusion

Whether tomorrow's kindergarten children begin school at age four or age five, and regardless of whether the time allotted to the kindergarten day consists of full days or half days, in the long run, the quality of the program must be our main cause for concern. Constructive approaches to kindergarten programming must consider those factions detailed above, and include the vital components of parental involvement; developmentally appropriate curriculum; teachers trained specifically in early childhood education; and comprehensive evaluative techniques. Such considerations would seem to hold the greatest promise for ensuring the quality education we seek for America's public school kindergarten children of the future.

REFERENCES

BOOKS

Campbell, B. D. (1988). From national debate to national responsibility. In S. Kagan & E. F. Zigler (Eds.), Early schooling: the national debate (pp. 65-83). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Zigler, E. F. (1988). Formal schooling for four-year-olds? no. In S. Kagan & E. F. Zigler (Eds.), Early schooling: the national debate (pp. 27-44). New Haven: Yale University Press.

PERIODICALS

Doud, J. L., & Finkelstein, J. M. (1985). A two-year kindergarten that works. Principal, 64, 18-21.

Elkind, D. (1986). Formal education and early childhood education: an essential difference. Phi Delta Kappan, 67, 631-636.

Glazer, J. S. (1985). Kindergarten and early education. Journal of the Association for Childhood Education International, 62, 13-18.

Jalongo, M. R. (1986). What is happening to kindergarten? Journal of the Association for Childhood Education International, 62, 155-160.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1986). Good teaching practices for 4-and-5-year-olds (Brochure No. 5221). Washington, DC: Author.

Seefeldt, C. (1985) Tomorrow's kindergarten: pleasure or pressure? Principal, 64, 12-17.